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AGNON'S הנדח 'HANIDAḤ' REVISITED

Aryeh Wineman

ABSTRACT

In this article, the late Aryeh Wineman makes a case for the use of Hasidic source material to fully appreciate what Agnon achieves in his story, "הנדח"[1] 'The Outcast.' In particular, the story reflects a passage from ספר שבחי הבעל-שם-טוב 'In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov'[2] and in a broader sense, the story also reflects several narratives including Rebbi Nahman of Bratzlav's " מעשה בבן הרב" 'A story of a Rabbi' Son,' and also examples of the "סיפור התקרבות" 'sippur hitkarvut', an account, usually, of the Baal Shem Tov's strategy for winning over adherents. Agnon's portrait of the teacher in the story, the *Hozer,* parallels that of the *Nazir*, the ascetic hermit, in a medieval Hebrew text, *בן המלך והנזיר* 'The Prince and the Hermit.' That early thirteenth century work, which also found its way into the Hasidic text, *תולדות יעקב יוסף* 'Tol'dot Ya'akov Yosef', tells the story of an Indian prince who ultimately rejects his royal role and its values under the influence of a secret teacher. The medieval story sheds light on the process by which the *Hozer* very slowly and gradually exposed Gershom, the young and impressionable protagonist, to an entirely different sense of the Torah, one that nourished his soul and opened within him a deeply ecstatic spiritual and emotional life until the tragic end of Agnon's tale.

INTRODUCTION

The background of Agnon's story, "haNidaḥ," is the protracted conflict between the *Mitnagdim* and the *Hasidim* that fully exposes its raw emotions. A *tzaddik*, Uriel – his name including the word, *Or* (light) that echoes in the story in significant ways – comes to town on a Friday afternoon to observe the Shabbat with his followers there, but is driven away by Avigdor, a community official. With a small group of his followers, Uriel goes to find shelter for Shabbat in a nearby village-inn.

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1. S. Y. Agnon, אלו ואלו (These and Those; Tel–Aviv: Schocken, 1968), pp. 9–56. In subsequent reference: S. Y. Agnon, These and Those. The story is now available in English as "The Outcast," translated by Marganit Weinberger-Rotman, in *The Outcast and Other Tales,* edited and annotated by Jeffrey Saks (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2017), pp.1-52.A fragment appeared in 1909 in השילוח (HaShilo'ah, Odessa, 21:443–445, and an expanded edition appeared in 1919, התקופה (HaT'kufah, Odessa, 21:443–445).

2. ספר שבחי הבעל-שם-טוב (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, ed. Samuel Aba Horodezky; Tel Aviv: D'vir, 1960), p. 61; *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, ed., Dan Ben Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington/London: 1970) #48, pp. 62–63.

He reacts to his expulsion from the town by invoking a curse upon a member of Avigdor's family, a curse that marks the *tzaddik*'s succumbing to the unholy response of retaliation.[3] Then, when Avigdor fears that his daughter, in the throes of death due to her heart disease, might be healed through the false impression Uriel's intervention, thus giving credence to what Avigdor views he as heretical deviances from proper faith, he prays that his daughter will die lest the *tzaddik* be credited with his daughter's recovery and healing.

Sometime following his daughter's death, Avigdor – who was willing to sacrifice his own daughter out of hatred for the Hasidic stream – engages a learned Jew who had come to the town, a person bearing all the marks and erudition of a rabbinic scholar to tutor his daughter's son, Gershom. The teacher, referred to as the *Hozer*, teaches Gershom the conventional and traditional rabbinic mode of study acceptable to Avigdor. The *Hozer*, however, also introduces his student, slowly and subtly, to another dimension of the same texts in a way that opens him to a much more spiritual, spirited, and ecstatic understanding. While Gershom was considered a brilliant student, he had only received sustenance for the mind, but little if any spiritual satisfaction, whereas the *Hozer* found ways to speak to his student's latent spiritual and emotional hunger.

SOURCES REFLECTED IN THE STORY

The story reflects a passage from *ספר שבחי הבעל-שם-טוב* 'Shivhe ha-Besht,'[4] in which Ya'akov Yosef of Polonoyye, having come under the influence of the Baal Shem Tov, was expelled from his rabbinical position in Shargorod and forced to leave town, just before the onset of Shabbat. He spent Shabbat in a nearby village, where a visiting preacher joined him and pronounced a curse upon the rabbi's opponents, a curse to which the *Besht* then voiced his disapproval.

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3. On the basis of a Hasidic source ספר סדר הדורות החדש (The New Order of Generations, Jerusalem, 1965, p. 10 in the name of Rav Avraham David of Bucacz and alluded to also in Agnon's עיר ומלואה (A City in its Fullness; 1973), pp. 530–531) such a curse appears as an unholy response to his own plight. See A. Wineman, עגנון ביצירת עיונים: אגדה ואמנות (Legend and Art: Studies in Agnon's Work; Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1982), pp. 82–83. In subsequent reference: Legend and Art: Studies in Agnon's Work.

4. ספר שבחי הבעל-שם-טוב (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, ed. Samuel Aba Horodezky; Tel Aviv: D'vir, 1960), p. 61; *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, ed., Dan Ben Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington/London: 1970) #48, pp. 62–63.

But in a broader sense, the story also reflects several narratives including Rebbi Nahman of Bratzlav's *ma'aseh b'ven ha-rav,*[5] and also examples of the *sippur hitkarvut*, an account, usually, of the Baal Shem Tov's strategy for winning over adherents. The last chapter of *haNidaḥ* echoes legendary accounts of the *Besht*'s drawing out of Dov Baer who, as an erudite scholar and skeptic, had come originally to test the *Besht,* but who, instead, remained and became his primary follower. In the version found in *Keter shem tov*, the earliest text to include Hasidic stories, the *Besht* revealed to Dov Baer an understanding and experience of the Zohar that, in its depth, far transcended Dov Baer's own grasp. The *Besht* then admitted that Dov Baer succeeded in understanding the *p'shat*, the plain meaning of the Zohar, but he added, "your way of learning lacks *n'shamah*," – lacks soul.[6]

In the concluding chapter of *haNidaḥ*, the *Hozer,* teaching Gershom, slowly and subtly planted seeds of spiritual experience and mystic depth that would be heretical in the eyes of Avigdor, who had engaged the *Hozer* as a teacher for his grandson. He therefore had to go about his teaching with great care and trepidation lest Avigdor become aware of the direction in which he is influencing his student, for were Avigdor to grasp the teacher's real purpose he would certainly terminate his teaching-assignment and more-than-likely drive him from town just as, earlier, he had done to Uriel.

HANIDAḤ AND *SEFER BEN HAMELEKH V'HANAZIR*

The situation of the *Hozer* parallels that of the *Nazir*, the ascetic hermit, in a medieval Hebrew text, בן המלך והנזיר 'The Prince and the Hermit.' That early thirteenth century work is one example of many such versions and

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5. See A. Wineman, "Agnon and Rabbi Nahman*,"* in *Jewish Book Annual,* Vol. 49 (New York: Jewish Book Council, 1991–1992), pp. 97–106.

6. כתר שם טוב (Keter shem tov), composed by Aharon ben Zvi Hirsch haKohen of Apt (Apitow) Zolkein 1794–1795; 1857, Lemberg, 1857, II, 28a–29b. See Gedalya Nigal, "מקור ראשוני של ספרות הספורת החסידית – על ספר כתר שם ומרכיביו" ("Primary Source of Hasidic Literature – On the Book of Keter Shem and Its Components"; *Sinai*, Vol. 79, [1976]: 132–146); and הסיפורת החסידית: תולדותיה ונושאיה (Hasidic Fiction: its History and Themes,) Jerusalem: Y. Marcus Publishers, 1981, pp. 20–22. Two versions of the meeting of Dov Baer with the *Besht* are found in such folk-accounts. The second, which appeared later, appears in שבחי הבעש"ט (Praises of the Baal Shem Tov [first edition, 1814, 9ab; Praises of the Baal Shem Tov, ed. Shalom Aba Horodetsky, (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947), pp. 70–72; Praises of the Baal Shem Tov, ed, Avraham Rubenstein (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1991), pp. 339–344, and Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 81–84.

adaptations in medieval literature, in various languages, of the story of an Indian prince who ultimately rejects his royal role and its values under the influence of a secret teacher. In that work, a translation from a now non-extant Arabic text, Avraham ben Shmuel ha-Levi Ibn Hasdai, like medieval Europe and its environs as a whole, was unaware that the prince in the account was actually the person we know as the Buddha.

While the king's value-system emphasized power, luxury and sensual pleasure, and he made great efforts to shield his son from any sense of suffering, distress or death, the *Nazir*, posing as a gem-merchant, subtly and secretly impacts the prince precisely in a contrary direction. He planted in the prince a contemplative bent and the need for compassion, growing out of an awareness of life's futility and its fleeting nature. As in the case of the *Hozer* in *haNidaḥ*, the person who so significantly impacts the central figure in the narrative, had to do so in a highly secretive way.

In addition, when that only son was born to the Indian king in the latter's advanced years, kindling the hope that he would be groomed to succeed his father on the throne, one of the wise men of the palace prophesied that the son would forego a royal role and turn instead to a reflective life of wandering. That prophecy, like Uriel's curse in *haNidaḥ*, is realized over the course of time. The spiritual tutor who had secretly befriended the prince was aware that the king had banished such ascetics from his kingdom and even burned them alive. Eventually the hermit fled the palace, presumably out of fear of the king, while explaining that "he had work to do elsewhere."[7]

In *haNidaḥ*, it was Gershom's grandfather who requested the *Hozer* to teach his grandson, unaware of the *Hozer*'s actual spiritual orientation. The *Hozer* soon sensed that Gershom's soul was of an extraordinary quality. Even as the *Hozer* very slowly and gradually exposed Gershom to an entirely different sense of the Torah, one that nourished his soul and opened within him a deeply ecstatic spiritual and emotional life, he had to be extremely careful to maintain the image of a conventional rabbinic teacher who represented the world of values of the *Mitnagdim*.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, three stories from that medieval work on the Prince and the *Nazir* found their way into *Tol'dot Ya'akov Yosef*,

7. ספר בן המלך והנזיר (The Book of the King's Son and the Monk, Zitomir, 1877), *Sha'ar* 30.

the first printed Hasidic text, which appeared in 1780.[8] *Sefer ben ha-melekh v'ha-nazir* was first printed in Constantinople in 1518, then printed a few times in Italy, and then underwent several printings in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe – five times in Warsaw alone[9] – and was printed also in Jerusalem in 1907. Agnon, who had such an extraordinary knowledge of Jewish texts would more-than-likely have been familiar with that work,[10] and one might ask whether the last chapter of Agnon's *haNidaḥ* intentionally reflects that medieval Hebrew text about the Indian prince and his tutor.

THE MEANING OF DEATH IN THE LAST CHAPTER OF *HANIDAḤ*

In *haNidaḥ*, Uriel's curse works itself out. Gershom is a victim of Uriel's descending, morally, to retribution in uttering a curse to fall on a descendent of Avigdor. The story concludes with the death of Gershom which the story attributes to Uriel's curse directed at a family-member of Avigdor. As a story revealing the power of a curse, *haNidaḥ* exemplifies a theme characteristic of Gothic and neo-Gothic literature. The same theme of the power of a curse and its effect over time is exemplified, for example, in Horace Walpole's eighteenth-century Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, and also in *The House of Seven Gables*, by the nineteenth-century American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

While *haNidaḥ* has usually been read and understood as the effect of that intemperate and sinful curse, the death of Gershom might indicate quite a different direction for interpretation. Furthermore, the key to Agnon's superb artistry in this story might be located in his presenting two very different understandings of Gershom's death, without either negating the other.

While the reader may have already recognized the presence of deeper spiritual longings in Gershom, Gershom sought to deny such longings within himself. Those very longings likely become all the more powerful precisely because he had shielded himself from them over time. Through the *Hozer*, Gershom came to feel a wholeness of love and joy and a deep spiritual longing that overwhelmed him. The *Mitnaged* in him vanished in

8. A. Wineman, "The Prince, the Hermit, and the *Kohen*: Stories from a Buddha-Tradition in the First Printed Hasidic Book," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, X (2009): 69–79.
9. 1870, 1884, 1889, 1894, 1902; also, Zilkoa, 1807; Zhitomir, 1877; Frankfurt-am-Main, 1867.
10. Two copies of this work survive in Agnon's library: The 1884 Warsaw edition from the press of Meir Yehiel Halter, and a modern edition prepared by A. M. Habermann (Tel Aviv, 1950).

the face of the emotional force of the *Hasid* that he never recognized within himself. And while his grandfather worried that, like Gershom's mother, his grandson might also be stricken by a weakness in his bodily heart, his metaphorical heart and soul triumphed in him over the exclusive pathways of mental dialectic.

The concluding chapter of the story appears to reflect something beyond the sole effect of the curse. Within Hasidic teaching, drawing from roots going much further back in time, a wholeness and depth of love and longing for the Divine is associated with death. In מאור ושמש 'Light and Sun,' for example, the collection of the sermonic discourses of Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Krakow, the preacher explains, based on the comments in *אור החיים* 'The Light of Life' of Hayyim ben-Atar, that the two sons of the biblical Aaron died, not due to any transgressions in their fulfilling their priestly duties, as claimed in classical sources,[11] but rather precisely because they had already perfected their soul-root. Having nothing left to perfect in themselves, they would no longer be able to bring others to atonement, the real function of the biblical priesthood as understood in Hasidic teaching. In a broader sense, they no longer had any need for continued life.[12] Elsewhere, Kalonymus Kalman Epstein suggested that when one's very body becomes soul-like, that person is no longer able to tolerate his body and his natural existence, but yearns for the higher world in which the body itself becomes soul. And when that happens, the person leaves the world and becomes an angel.[13] Religious ecstasy of such depth can be satisfied only with the death of the body.

An earlier Hasidic figure, Shlomo of Lutzk, in *Dibrat Shlomo*, explained that during the course of life, while existing in a body, one can have only a limited experience of the Light of God, whereas a much deeper and more powerful experience of God's presence is possible only with death.[14] This theme is mentioned in passing, in an analysis of *haNidaḥ* in my book, *Legend and Art: Studies in Agnon's Work*, published in 1982. Some twelve years later, in a series of lectures published as *The*

11. מדרש ויקרא רבה (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah) 20: 8–11.
12. מאור ושמש (Light and Sun, Warsaw: B'nai Shmuel Argelbrand, 1876–1877) אחרי מות (Ahare mot, III, 13ff; tr. A. Wineman, *Letters of Light* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Imprint, Wipf and Stock, 2015), pp. 154–156.
13. מאור ושמש, פנחס (Light and Sun, Pinhas, IV, 22ab; tr., *Letters of Light*, pp. 195–196.
14. דברת שלמה על אחרי מות (Dibrat Shlomo on Ahare mot, Brooklyn: Yosef Hayyim Friedman), n.d. Part III, pp. 36–37; first printed in Zolkiew, 1848. Note also the discussion on the same biblical episode in the Zohar, III, 57a–59a and in אור החיים (The Light of Life) on Lev. 10:1–3.

Kiss of God, Michael Fishbane traced that association of death with a depth of spirituality through the course of Jewish thought going back to the midrashic motif that Moses died with a kiss from God.[15] Though Fishbane mentioned neither *haNidaḥ* nor its author, one might easily grasp that such an association of an ascent to spiritual heights with death is enacted in the concluding chapter of *haNidaḥ*.

This theme is actually sounded earlier in the story when Uriel was in the village-inn after the end of the Shabbat: he experienced a definite spiritual high and immediately suspected that his soul might be about to cast off his body and that he could thus die.[16] The *Hozer* inconspicuously led Gershom to that high level at which his longing for God surmounted all-natural bodily consciousness. The curse itself could have been fulfilled through various circumstances. But in *haNidaḥ*, the curse led to Gershom's death by means of his ascending to such a spiritual height that one has no further desire for life but only for that higher perfection that is beyond this life and this world.

The overtones of verses from *Shir ha-shirim*, which play such a significant role in *haNidaḥ,* are evoked in a string of Jewish spiritual sources which associate the summit of spiritual intensity, joy and longing with death. Gershom's death occurs precisely as he calls out the verse, הֱבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו: 'the king has brought me to his [very] chambers' (Song of Songs 1:4).

15. Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* –The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).
16. Y. Agnon, These and Those, p. 62, toward end of Ch. 2.